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Paul Dessau and the hard work of socialist music in the GDR

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As soon as the contradiction ceases, life, too, comes to an end, and death steps in.¹

Paul Dessau, quoting Engels (*Anti-Düring*)

In his writings, Paul Dessau returns again and again to the idea of music as hard work for the composer (producer), the performer (interpreter), and the listener (recipient). This hard work is based on the idea of confronting, and potentially resolving, contradictions of the kind referred to by Engels in *Anti-Düring*. As Dessau noted in 1957 in a brief text entitled 'On Dissonances':

On closer inspection it has to be said that moments of tension, which is how I like to refer to dissonances, are nothing other than contradictions, without which nothing works in music, in any art form, or indeed in life itself.²

The principal source for these moments of tension, contradiction, and dissonance in Dessau's mature work is his encounter with the two figures who came to dominate his

¹ Paul Dessau, *Aus Gesprächen* (Leipzig: VEB Verlag für Musik, 1974), 11; Paul Dessau, 'Bemerkungen zur Oper "Woyzeck"', in *Notizen zu Noten* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1974), 173. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from German in this essay are by the author.

² Paul Dessau, 'Über Dissonanzen', in *Notizen zu Noten* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1974), 24.

musical theory and practice: Arnold Schoenberg and Bertolt Brecht. No other composer made a more concerted or enduring effort than Dessau to synthesize the two modernisms represented by Schoenberg and Brecht: the aesthetic on the one hand and the political on the other. This has made his music unpalatable for many. To cite just one example: a substantial review on 12 October 1962, in the GDR's daily newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, of the oratorio *Appeal of the Working Class* (*Appell der Arbeiterklasse*, 1960), a work to which I will return in what follows, censured the 'preponderance of aggressive, complicated rhythms, piercingly dissonant sound clusters' and an indiscriminate use of 'distorted melodies', finally accusing Dessau of deriving his entire musical idiom from a concept of 'human annihilation' when in fact 'the appeal of the workers' parties and the draft programme of the CPSU are grounded in an optimistic awareness that the fate of the world is today determined by the strength of socialism!'³ Even Eisler, who in his *Hollywood Songbook* (1938-43) set a number of Brecht poems in the manner of Schoenberg, did not consistently attempt such a daring fusion of formalism and materialism: his song cycle, for example, for all its eclecticism is very much in the tradition of the modern *Lied* and there is no programmatic attempt to integrate or fuse Schoenberg's serialism and Brecht's materialism within single works. Eisler's career in the GDR, with notable exceptions such as the *Serious Songs* (*Ernstes Gesänge*) of 1962, demonstrates that his approach tended to be to alternate between different approaches and styles diachronically, rather than synchronically; in his *Letter to West Germany* (*Brief an Westdeutschland*) of 1951, the year

³ Hansjürgen Schaefer, 'Appell der Arbeiterklasse: Chorsinfonie von Paul Dessau uraufgeführt', *Neues Deutschland*, 12 October 1962, 4.

which also saw the publication of a number of his 'easily graspable' *New German Folk Songs* (*Neue Deutsche Volkslieder*),⁴ Eisler explained this alternation in the following terms:

'Listeners and composers must learn to distinguish between genres which can easily be understood and genres which make things difficult for the listener, even demanding a little preparation'.⁵ Speaking in interview about the *New German Folk Songs* themselves, he stressed the importance of keeping each individual genre 'pure and not mixing it with other types of art'.⁶

Dessau, on the other hand, favoured mixing musical genres and styles. In a public statement delivered in 1964 – entitled 'Creating the Golden Present' in its published form – Dessau refers with assent to both Brecht and Schoenberg in setting out, in typically unambiguous and straightforward terms, his political and artistic programme. It is one based on contradiction and struggle:

Schoenberg once told me, in the context of his *String Trio* opus 46 [sic], that for him all music was programme music. For our part, we must make every effort to ensure

⁴ This is Eisler's own description of them. Hanns Eisler, 'Das neue Volkslied: Gespräch mit Hanns Eisler', in *Materialien zu einer Dialektik der Musik* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1973), 201-203, p. 202.

⁵ Hanns Eisler, 'Brief nach Westdeutschland', in *Materialien zu einer Dialektik der Musik*, 211-223, p. 222.

⁶ Eisler, 'Das neue Volkslied', p. 202.

that the impulses and insights of our age become the programme for our creative work!

I don't doubt that every one of us is, in some way, steeped in the revolutionary spirit of our age. But let us not forget that there is no method of working that is not born of contradiction. Long live contradictions! They are at the root of all the creative impulses that spring from the work we undertake in the new age of socialism that has dawned here, in our Germany! In this Germany there is no place for the existential fear under which so many people are still forced to work.

That alone should spur us on to transform what Brecht, in *The Cultivation of Millet*, referred to as 'the golden someday' into a golden present.⁷

According to Dessau, and as already noted above, an artwork is not just a product of labour, but also requires labour on the part of its performers and listeners. Both production and reception are work processes: art, he claimed, 'is not a "finished product" but an "experiment" in Brecht's sense of the word'; it demands that a piece of music is 'co-created in the listener'.⁸

Brecht himself articulated these ideas most explicitly in his learning plays (*Lehrstücke*), and it is perhaps not coincidental that Dessau's first encounter with his later friend, albeit at this point only from afar, was at the 1929 Baden-Baden Music Festival where Brecht's *Learning Play* (*Lehrstück*), with music by Paul Hindemith and later renamed *The Baden-Baden Lesson*

⁷ Dessau, 'Das goldene Jetzt gestalten' in *Notizen zu Noten*, 14-15, p. 15.

⁸ Dessau, 'Der Anspruch der Musik' ('The Demands of Art') in *Notizen zu Noten*, p. 15.

on Consent (Das Badener Lehrstück vom Einverständnis) was premiered. The learning plays were a formative influence for Dessau, who composed his own version for children, *The Railway Game (Das Eisenbahnspiel)*, in June of the following year. In the GDR he would also compose music for a revival of parts of the *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent* by the Berliner Ensemble in 1949.

Brecht's play is modernist and aesthetically innovative on the one hand, comic, absurdist, blatant even on the other. This not only makes it exceptionally difficult to classify – comparable in this to Schoenberg's much-misunderstood and underrated comic opera *Von heute auf morgen* Op. 32, also of 1929 – but also quite disconcerting to listen to, as sacred cows of modernism encounter clowning, buffoonery, and broad slapstick. *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent* embraces a diverse assortment of different styles, genres, and registers from the liturgical to clowning, from blank verse to prose commentary, from Zen-like aphorisms to Biblical rhetoric and blatant propaganda. In the original production it also incorporated still and moving image projection (of photographs and a dance performed by Valeska Gert).

With the political upheavals in Europe of the 1930s, and consequent loss of a coherent framework and audience for his more radical, modernist dramatic experiments, Brecht abandoned the learning play project, leaving what might have been its apotheosis, *Untergang des Egoisten Johann Fatzer (Downfall of the Egoist Johann Fatzer, 1926-30)* unfinished. Although he did very briefly return to the learning play in the early years of the GDR, for example as a possible model for the Berliner Ensemble's outreach work in factories, Brecht concentrated for the remainder of his career on the *Schaustück* – a play presented as a spectacle in a more-or-less traditional way – rather than the *Lehrstück*. I

would suggest that it is in fact Dessau who, right through to his death in 1979, continued and expanded Brecht's abandoned project of synthesizing formal experimentation with Marxism.

One of the things that is striking about Dessau's synthesizing modernist programme is the way in which it re-positions or re-frames his mentors: Schoenberg's musical innovations are stripped of the autonomy so prized by Theodor W. Adorno in *Philosophy of New Music* – on occasion, for example, they are employed in the service of *Gebrauchsmusik* (functional music or 'music for use'), as in a particularly challenging, twelve-tone celebration of the new socialist age *Hymn to the Beginning of a New History of Humanity* (*Hymne auf den Beginn einer neuen Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1959 to a text of Johannes R. Becher) which, according to one official report at least, baffled the factory workers for whom it was performed, although they were very taken by the composer himself;⁹ the laconic directness and political candour of Brecht's post-learning play works, on the other hand, are often set against considerable melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic complexity, for example in the songs for *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (*Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, 1952-55), which even Brecht had reservations about.¹⁰ Put at its simplest, one senses that Dessau wants to de-mystify Schoenberg and to complicate Brecht.

⁹ As reported by Dessau biographer Fritz Hennenberg, see: Fritz Hennenberg, 'Schwierige fünfziger Jahre: Paul Dessau's Rückkehr aus dem Exil', in *Paul Dessau – Von Geschichte gezeichnet*, 117-131, p. 129.

¹⁰ Dessau admitted in an interview with Hans Bunge (on 30 September 1958) that Brecht criticized the music, that it was 'much too concise, much too cool, not sensuous enough; it

Demystification on the one hand, complication on the other: the common denominator is what might be termed 'refunctioning' – the destabilization and disruption of existing forms, ideas, and expectations. Perhaps unsurprisingly the frame-of-mind that Dessau most explicitly rejects is comfort:

Art is never comfortable. Art can't be comfortable. It makes demands and it forces you to think. And thinking is famously uncomfortable. For heaven's sake, we don't even need to discuss these things. We have to do a lot of things that are uncomfortable. Building Socialism isn't comfortable. We are making a huge effort and we will achieve it. That's why I am for uncomfortable things.¹¹

For Dessau, discomfort could come in the form of musical complexity – in an unpublished text entitled 'Progress in Music and Musicology' ('Fortschritt in der Musik und Musikwissenschaft') he lists expanded concepts of tonality, emancipation of the dissonance (and cadence), the enrichment of rhythmical elements – or in the guise of disconcerting

just didn't work' (Hans Bunge, 'Gespräch mit Paul Dessau über Bertolt Brecht am 30. September 1958 in Zeuthen', Akademie der Künste (AdK), Berlin, Paul-Dessau-Archiv, Dessau 1768, p. 20). On Brecht's 'falling-out' with Dessau over this music see also: Joy H. Calico, 'Musical Threnodies for Brecht', in *Brecht and the GDR: Politics, Culture, Posterity*, edited by Laura Bradley, Karen Leeder (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2011), 163-182, p. 176. I would like to thank Maxim Dessau and Daniela Reinhold for permission to reproduce unpublished documents from the Paul-Dessau-Archiv.

¹¹ Dessau, *Aus Gesprächen*, 1

simplicity:¹² for example, his first GDR opera, *The Condemnation of Lukullus* (1950), was immediately followed by the semi-staged cantata *Report from Herrnburg* (*Herrnburger Bericht*, 1951), a programmatically simple (but not simplistic) counterpart to the dense and complex opera which preceded it.¹³ Moreover, Dessau was never reluctant to characterize himself, with disarming straightforwardness, as an uncomplicated socialist realist – ‘I am a socialist and I work in a realist manner, I know for whom I am working and that I want to be understood, so I am indeed a socialist realist artist’¹⁴ – and it is in what Matthias Tischer has termed Dessau’s ‘compositional gestures of commitment’ to the Party and State, and in his film scores, that what might be termed the Zhdanovist aspect of his music is most readily heard.¹⁵ For example, the use of folk, workers’, and soldiers’ songs in the score to Andrew and Annelie Thorndike’s ‘Stalinist blockbuster’ *The German Story* (*Du und mancher Kamerad...*) of 1956, complies with the socialist realist demand for popular forms

¹² Paul Dessau, ‘Fortschritt in der Musik und Musikwissenschaft’, unpublished manuscript for a speech, AdK, Berlin, Dessau 1765. At the beginning of this text he affirmatively quotes a slogan for the 25 Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the SED (1955): ‘Progress comes from the German Democratic Republic’.

¹³ See: Martin Brady, “‘Die Hauptsache ist, plump denken lernen.’ Brecht’s *Herrnburger Bericht* as a GDR Learning Play’, *German Life and Letters*, 70/3 (2017), 356-366

¹⁴ Dessau, *Aus Gesprächen*, 195.

¹⁵ Matthias Tischer, *Komponieren für und wider den Staat: Paul Dessau in der DDR* (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2009), 64.

(*Volkstümlichkeit*) and the primacy of vocal music.¹⁶ A number of occasional pieces, from the 1950s in particular, announce their commitment forthrightly in their titles – *Funeral March on the Death of the People’s Policeman Helmut Just Treacherously Murdered by the Warmongers for Large Wind Orchestra* (*Trauermarsch auf den Tod des von den Kriegshetzern meuchlings ermordeten Volkspolizisten Helmut Just für großes Blasorchester*) of 1953 is an obvious example, although when it was released on an Eterna record in 1960, alongside Ruth Zechlin’s *Lidice Cantata* (*Lidice-Kantate*, 1958) and Karl-Heinz Dieckmann’s *Buchenwald Poem* (*Buchenwald-Poem*, 1958), it bore the slightly more sober title *Symphonic Funeral March in Honour of the Murdered People’s Policeman Helmut Just* (*Sinfonischer Trauermarsch zu Ehren des Ermordeten Volkspolizisten Helmut Just*).¹⁷ In his book on Dessau’s work in the GDR, Matthias Tischer notes that although Dessau’s gestures of commitment become less frequent after the 1950s, they remain a constant in his output

¹⁶ See Martin Brady, Carola Nielinger-Vakil, “‘What a Satisfying Task for a Composer!’: Paul Dessau’s Music for The German Story (...Du und mancher Kamerad)’, in *Classical Music in the German Democratic Republic: Production and Reception*, ed. Kyle Frackman, Larson Powell (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2015), 195-218.

¹⁷ In 1964 Dessau renamed his Becher setting *Hymn to the Beginning of a New History of Humanity*, mentioned above, *Hymn 1959* (*Hymnus 1959*), and it appeared on a NOVA record under that title in 1974.

through to the 1970s, and he indeed cites *Choral Music No. 5 (Chormusik Nr 5)* of 1976, discussed in this essay, as a late example.¹⁸

However, despite this partial avowal of simplicity, and the composition of uncomplicated, occasional pieces, Dessau remained, as a devoted disciple of Schoenberg, a staunch and outspoken advocate of modernist complexity as an aesthetic complement to progressive socialism. In this he was not only firmly rooted in what film scholars usefully term the 'political modernism' of the interwar years, but also an avant-gardist of the kind who, according to art historian Peter Bürger, fights for the 'integration (*Aufhebung*) of art into the praxis of everyday life'.¹⁹ This, paradoxically, allows for the reading of socialist realism's call for popular forms, often entailing literal quotation of well-known literary and musical material, as an avant-garde practice.

Quotation was a technique Dessau used extensively and one he understood, in the manner of Brecht and Walter Benjamin, in unambiguously political terms. In a substantial 1963 essay on his encounters with Brecht, Dessau credits his friend and collaborator with introducing him to the fine art of plagiarism, as he terms it, during the composition of the music for *Mother Courage and her Children*: 'At the time this kind of plagiarism [*Plagiiierung*] was quite alien to me. Now it seems to me not only legitimate, but also entirely natural and productive.'²⁰ Plagiarism in the sense it is used by Brecht and Dessau is not a short-cut or a

¹⁸ Tischer, *Komponieren für und wider den Staat*, 64.

¹⁹ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 72.

²⁰ Dessau, 'Begegnungen mit Brecht', in *Notizen zu Noten*, 37-44, p. 42.

symptom of laziness or lack of inspiration, but a technique of refunctioning.²¹ For Brecht 'it is precisely the innovators who will expropriate, commit plagiarism', and he called for 'training in the art of quotation'.²²

Tellingly, it is also a key feature of the very first works in which Dessau experimented with synthesising the two modernisms, a few years before he met Schoenberg and Brecht in person, but at a time when he already knew their work from a distance. A paradigmatic example of this experimental synthesis, and one which turns to quotation for its musical material, coincides with the composer's first experiments in serialism under the tutelage of René Leibowitz whilst in exile in Paris: the short dodecaphonic solo piano piece *Guernica* of 1937. It has been identified by a number of commentators, including Daniela Reinhold and

²¹ As Guy Debord has it in *The Society of the Spectacle* 'Le plagiat est nécessaire. Le progrès l'implique' ('plagiarism is necessary, progress implies it'). Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* (Paris: Éditions Gérard Lebovici, 1987), 160. Debord even praised Brecht in 1956 for reworking the classics as an act of *détournement*. Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, 'Methods of Detournement' in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets: Berkeley, 1981), 8-14, p. 9.

²² Bertolt Brecht: 'Plagiate' in Bertolt Brecht, *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 21, ed. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei, and Klaus-Detlef Müller (Berlin, Weimar, Frankfurt am Main: Aufbau, Suhrkamp, 1988-2000), 404-5, p. 404. Edition hereafter abbreviated to 'BFA'. 'Ziele der Gesellschaft der Dialektiker,' BFA 21, 536-37, p. 537.

Thomas Phleps,²³ as a seminal work in Dessau's oeuvre, not just in its serialism – which Till Kippler has interpreted as an act of anti-totalitarian resistance²⁴ – but also in its intensity of expression, brevity and ellipsis, and explicit reference, in both its title and musical argument, to contemporary political struggle, the bombing of the Basque town of the title by German and Italian bombers on 26 April 1937 under the code name 'Operation Rügen'.

Guernica, initially inspired according to its composer by Picasso's famous painting, is also paradigmatic in its use of quotation, its intertextuality: as Phleps has convincingly demonstrated in his substantial study of Dessau's piece, there are quotations from the composer's own first Brecht setting, 'The Battle Song of the Black Straw Hats' ('Kampflied der schwarzen Strohhüte') of 1936, the 'Internationale' (Pierre de Geyter to words of Eugène Pottier, 1888), and Eisler/Brecht's 'United Front Song' ('Einheitsfrontlied', 1934).²⁵

Thirty-three years later, in what by then had become a characteristic act of self-citation, Dessau quotes *Guernica* alongside his music for Brecht's *Mother Courage* in the short solo

²³ See *Paul Dessau 1894-1979: Dokumente zu Leben und Werk*, ed. by Daniela Reinhold (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1995), 43 and Thomas Phleps, 'Guernica – Musik im Exil', in *Paul Dessau – Von Geschichte gezeichnet*, ed. by Klaus Angermann (Hochheim: Wolke Verlag, 1995), 71-100.

²⁴ Till Knipper, 'Ein kleiner Blödsinn oder künstlerischer Widerstand aus dem Exil? Paul Dessaus "Guernica (nach Picasso)" für Klavier', in Wolfgang Gratzer, Otto Neumaier, eds, *Guernica. Über Gewalt und politische Kunst* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2010), 133-153, p. 153.

²⁵ Phleps, 'Guernica – Musik im Exil', 78-82.

piano piece *For Helli* (*Für Helli*) in memoriam Helene Weigel, who had died on 6 May 1971. Composed for her funeral, and performed by Dessau himself during the ceremony, it not only reworks *Guernica*, but also quotes the ballad with which Weigel became synonymous, ‘The Song of Mother Courage’ (‘Lied der Mutter Courage’, also known as the ‘Geschäftslied [business song] der Mutter Courage’) from Dessau’s music to Brecht’s play. These quotations, which constitute the principal musical material of this brief piece, not only evoke – for those able to recognize them of course – the joint experience of exile and shared political commitment, but also celebrate Weigel’s most celebrated role at the Berliner Ensemble in Berlin. The intertextuality of *For Helli*, which it shares with many other works Dessau composed in East Germany, including the near-contemporaneous *Orchestral Music No. 4* (*Orchestermusik Nr. 4*, 1972-73) with its myriad Bach quotations, supports the claim made by Kyle Frackman and Larson Powell that pieces like this ‘contain in their own internal contradictions the difficult balancing act GDR composers had to perform between musical modernity and politically motivated accessibility’.²⁶ As an example they cite a composition apparently also admired by Dessau’s friend Luigi Nono, *Quattrodramma* for four celli, two pianos and two percussionists of 1965, which alongside self-quotations also incorporates a passage from Hans Werner Henze’s *Being Beautiful* (1963).²⁷ Dessau’s earlier compositions including *Guernica* (published by Breitkopf & Härtel in the FRG in 1958 and the GDR in 1979) and, for example, two exile works he was particularly keen to see performed in the GDR, the twelve-tone Verlaine setting *Les Voix* of 1939 and the large-scale

²⁶ Frackmann, Powell, eds, *Classical Music in the German Democratic Republic*, 8.

²⁷ See: Paul Dessau, ‘Zum “Quattrodramma”’, in *Notizen zu Noten*, p. 96.

Brecht setting *Deutsches Miserere* of 1946 (premiered in Leipzig under Herbert Kegel in 1966),²⁸ suggest that the contradictions are more than just a response to specific pressures experienced under one regime (the GDR), as is implied by Frackman and Powell – they are a fundamental principle guiding Dessau’s musical thinking and compositional practice. From *Guernica* onwards he retained a tenacious and combative faith in progress both artistic and socio-political, the one inseparable from the other, together with an acute sense of being on a musical and pedagogical mission to enlighten, to educate, and to challenge: ‘Progress entails experimentation!’ as he laconically put it in a draft speech in the 1950s.²⁹ The consistency and drive underpinning this programme is manifest in the tendency of individual works, especially later ones – *For Helli* is paradigmatic in this respect – to function as reiterations of musical and political preoccupations, a characteristic accentuated by the insistent use of quotation. In what follows I intend to discuss the generative interplay of Marxism and formal experimentation – manifest as quotation and reiteration – in Dessau’s use, across a 25-year period, of a simple-but-striking party-political cryptogram.

²⁸ This question is addressed in many of the contributions in Nina Ermlich Lehmann, Sophie Fetthauer, Mathias Lehmann, Jörg Rothkamm, Silke Wenzel, Kristina Wille eds., *Fokus Deutsches Miserere von Paul Dessau und Bertolt Brecht: Festschrift Peter Petersen zum 65 Geburtstag* (Hamburg: von Bockel Verlag, 2005).

²⁹ Unpublished sketch for the speech ‘Einiges, worüber wir Musiker nur wenig oder gar nicht sprechen’ (‘Some things we musicians speak about hardly ever or not at all’), AdK, Berlin, Dessau 1767.

Within the context of Dessau's GDR work, the *Condemnation of Lukullus*, referred to already as the complex 'other' of *Report From Herrnburg*, is a paradigmatic example of what Nina Noeske has termed Dessau's 'unique synthesis of progressive art with political and pedagogical resolve'.³⁰ Following its controversial premiere in 1951, it became the object of a fierce 'formalism debate', documented since unification in numerous articles and a substantial volume edited by Joachim Lucchesi.³¹ This debate, a confrontation between political modernism and socialist realist orthodoxy, is, I would suggest, pre-figured in the opera's brief coda which follows the furious, Trautonium-accompanied denunciation of Lukullus-Hitler in the final scene where the dictator is ritualistically banished to Hell: 'Oh yes, let him and all like him be cast into Nothingness!' Woven into the dense texture of this coda is a set of complex variations on a three-note motif which, in German notation, spells out the initials of the GDR's Socialist Unity Party, the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands): Eb [Es], E, D. This motif is treated in a manner akin to serialism: it appears in its original form, inverse, retrograde, and inverse retrograde. What we have here, of course, is a classic example of musical cryptography, a practice of which Dessau particularly fond. One of his last works before leaving the United States was a *Piano Piece on B-A-C-H* (*Klavierstück über B-A-C-H*, dated 30 July 1948) and his *Bach Variations* (*Bach-Variationen*,

³⁰ Nina Noeske, *Musikalische Dekonstruktion: Neue Instrumentalmusik in der DDR* (Cologne, Weimer, Vienna: Böhlau, 2007), 2.

³¹ Joachim Lucchesi, ed., *Das Verhör in der Oper: Die Debatte um die Aufführung 'Das Verhör des Lukullus' von Bertolt Brecht und Paul Dessau* (Berlin: BasisDruck Verlag, 1993).

1963) – the most celebrated, and performed, piece of orchestral New Music in the GDR – opens with an intricate interweaving of ciphers for Bach and Schoenberg.

In 1951 the S-E-D cryptogram was not just a coded celebration of the Party, but also an acronym for the GDR's call for unification under socialism with the slogan 'Germans Unify!', 'Seid einig Deutsche!', also SED. As Fritz Hennenberg wrote in 1963 in an analysis of *Lukullus*: 'the warmongers must be stripped of their power through a workers' united front.'³² Although this second implication of the S-E-D motif is a product of the early years of the GDR, the cryptogram itself, as a Party moniker, becomes something of an *idée fixe* across twenty-five years of Dessau's work in the GDR, reappearing – programmatically unchanged to signal continued loyalty – in numerous pieces and also, at least in a manuscript in the Paul-Dessau-Archiv in Berlin, as the opening three tones of a twelve-tone row expanded into a row table dated around 1975 (see Example 2).³³ In obsessively reusing the motif Dessau pays homage not only to his Party, but also to his two modernist mentors: Brecht, with whom it is inevitably associated through *Lukullus*, and Schoenberg who, as H. H. Stuckenschmidt has convincingly argued, himself reused a basic three-note cell, the so-called *Urzelle*, across his entire career: from *Verklärte Nacht* Op. 4 and the *First Chamber Symphony* Op. 9, through the row of *Von heute auf morgen* – where it is combined with the

³² Fritz Hennenberg, *Dessau Brecht Musikalische Arbeiten* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1963), 51.

³³ AdK, Berlin, PDA 1.74.1113.1-8. I would like to thank Alexander Brady for help with the music examples in this article.

cryptogram AS – to the *Violin Concerto* Op. 36 and beyond.³⁴ I would also suggest a parallel to the three-note pizzicato chord in bb. 52 and 232 of the *String Trio* Op. 45, which Schoenberg subsequently told Thomas Mann ‘represented his illness and medical treatment’, a life-saving injection.³⁵ An analogy can be drawn between the role of the SED within the divided body of post-war Germany and the injection that saved Schoenberg’s life in Los Angeles in spring 1946. Dessau knew Schoenberg’s *String Trio* very well: later that year, when he was not only in regular personal contact with the composer, but also occasionally working for him in Los Angeles, he paid Schoenberg ten dollars for a photocopy of the piece, which he analysed and corrected before making Schoenberg aware of some mistakes. Schoenberg apparently responded that corrections would only make things worse.³⁶

Example 1: Tone row from a row table in the Paul-Dessau-Archiv, c. 1975. AdK, Berlin, PDA

1.74.1113.1-8. Used with permission.



³⁴ H H Stuckenschmidt, *Schönberg: Leben Umwelt Werk* (Munich, Mainz: Piper and Schott, 1989), 477–86.

³⁵ Quoted in Malcolm MacDonald, *Schoenberg* (London and Melbourne: J. M. Dent, 1987), 151.

³⁶ Frank Schneider, 'Dessau und Schönberg im amerikanischen Exil', in Klaus Angermann, ed., *Paul Dessau – von Geschichte gezeichnet* (Hofheim: Wolke, 1994), 61–70, pp. 66–7.

Within Dessau's post-*Lukullus* works, the S-E-D cryptogram becomes a leitmotif: shortly after the composition of the opera it reappears in the cantata *To the Mothers and To the Teachers* (*An die Mütter und an die Lehrer*, 1950); in the substantial oratorio *Appeal of the Working Class* (1960), which is in part twelve-tone (deploying the so-called 'Puntilla-row'); in Act 2 Scene 7 of the opera *Einstein* (1971-73; see Example 3), in the context of a plea for peace in the nuclear age which echoes the *Appeal*; and in the *Choral Music No. 5*, to which I will now turn for the remainder of this essay.³⁷



On 21 January 1976 *Neues Deutschland* published a text by Dessau about a forthcoming piece for the 9th Party Congress to be held in May:

First I am a communist, then a composer. To be a model as a communist – in my political attitude and artistic approach – is my constant aim.

For encouragement to write a piece of music for the 9th Party Congress (and I sincerely hope I will succeed) I am indebted to the support and respect of many comrades and in particular the faith my Party places in me, to which I hope to do justice with this work.³⁸

In his brief statement of Party loyalty, Dessau stresses that the goals set out in the new statute for the 9th Party Congress are ambitious and that their implementation will demand ‘not only revolutionary drive, but also conscious discipline’. For Dessau, moreover, political and artistic struggle are here analogous insofar as both depend on a combination of dynamism, on the one hand, and strict organisation, on the other.

Dessau, as we have seen, derives from Schoenberg and Brecht a theory and practice of composition which combines (or juxtaposes) modernist difficulty with accessibility; musical complexity requires simplicity – or even blatancy, as in the case of the S-E-D motif – as a constructive and constitutive other. Brecht’s poem ‘In Praise of Communism’ (‘Lob des Kommunismus’, BFA 11, 234) describes its object as ‘the simple thing / That is hard to achieve’, and it is possible that Dessau had this in mind when he noted in his diary on 1

³⁸ Paul Dessau, ‘Als Kommunist Vorbild sein’, *Neues Deutschland*, 21 January 1976, 3.

February 1976 that *Choral Music No. 5* was simple, but had required ‘a lot of work’.³⁹ For the listener the dialectic of simplicity and complexity in this piece is manifest in two quite straightforward ways: first in the alternation between musically complex passages characterized by abrupt changes of style, dense counterpoint, and unexpected caesuras with the simple and insistent repetition of the S-E-D motif. Here the piece echoes both of the compositions from which the cryptogram is quoted – the cantata *To the Mothers and To the Teachers*, the oratorio *Appeal of the Working Class*, and the opera *Einstein*. In all four works the cipher is readily identifiable, even to the untrained ear, in a way it is not within the dense coda to *Lukullus*. The second manifestation of the dialectic of simplicity and complexity is even more blatant than the one operating on the musical level: the disparity between the transparently propagandistic text and the complexity of the musical setting.

In *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Slavoj Žižek describes Heiner Müller’s poem in *Choral Music No. 5*, a collage of quotations from a speech

³⁹ Paul Dessau, ‘*Let’s Hope for the Best*’, ed. Daniela Reinhold (Hofheim: Wolke, 2000), 139.

In interview with Luca Lombardi in 1972 Dessau had noted that his goal in composing *Einstein* had been ‘clarity, a position which tries not to present the listener with puzzles that I can barely solve myself [...]. Nevertheless, what I have done is very complicated; when I now look at the score of “Einstein” many things really amaze me and I say to myself, oh well, it really isn’t that simple after all.’ Luca Lombardi, ‘Was heißt denn hier Würde? Was Arbeiter für Komponisten, Komponisten für Arbeiter und Brecht für beide tun können: Ein Gespräch mit dem DDR-Musiker Paul Dessau’, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 15 December 1973; see: AdK, Berlin, Dessau 1772.

of Erich Honecker from June 1975, as an 'obscurity', noting an 'extreme disparity, tension even, between the thoroughly modernist, non-melodic, atonal music, and the utter banality of the text' and concludes that the 'frontier between the (state byzantine) Sublime and the ridiculous is here effectively indecipherable'.⁴⁰

Like the persistently repeated S-E-D cryptogram, which structures the piece across the fifty-one pages of the score, Heiner Müller's text is certainly simple in its socialist rhetoric:

'GREAT THINGS HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED / Through the power of the people and for the benefit of the people / In collaboration with the Soviet Union' ('GROSSES WURDE VOLLBRACHT / Mit der Kraft des Volkes und zum Wohl des Volkes / In Bruderbund mit der Sowjetunion').⁴¹ However, it is not straightforward either when heard in Dessau's polyvalent setting or read in the context of the critique of ideology in Müller's famous play *Hamlet*

⁴⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London, New York: Verso, 2012), 699-700. The recording of the piece referred to by Žižek is of the premiere performance on 16 May 1976 in the Funkhaus Berlin, released on the CD *Die Partei hat immer recht: Eine Dokumentation in Liedern* (DeutschlandRadio, 1996). The piece is also available in a version recorded on 24 February 1984 in the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin on the CD *Musik in Deutschland 1950-2000: Chorgesang mit Orchester 1970-1990* (Deutscher Musikrat, RCA Red Seal, 2005).

⁴¹ Heiner Müller, 'GROSSES WURDE VOLLBRACHT', *Werke 1: Die Gedichte*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1998), 206. See also: Paul Dessau, *Chormusik Nr. 5 für Baß-Solo, großen Chor und großes Orchester* (Leipzig, Dresden: Edition Peters, 1981).

Machine (*Die Hamletmaschine*) of the following year.⁴² In the fourth scene of that work the Hamlet Actor (*Hamletdarsteller*) declares: 'I am the type-writer. [...] I am the data bank.' Towards the end of the scene, a stage direction calls for the '*Tearing of a photograph of the author*'.⁴³ If 'Hamlet machine' is a cryptic allusion to 'Heiner Müller', then I would suggest there is an antecedent in *Choral Music No. 5* for which Müller functions as a 'Honecker machine'. The full title of the poem, reinstated in the latest edition of Müller's collected poems, reads:

For the IX. Party Conference of the SED in May 1976

From a speech of the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the German Socialist Unity Party and President of the State Council of the German Democratic Republic, Erich Honecker,

arranged by Heiner Müller⁴⁴

A comparison of the poem with Honecker's speech, published under the title 'On the Announcement of the IX. Party Congress of the German Socialist Unity Party' ('Zur

⁴² See Achim Heidenreich, 'Chormusik mit Orchester 1970-1990', CD booklet in *Musik in Deutschland 1950-2000: Chorgesang mit Orchester 1970-1990* (CD, Deutscher Musikrat, RCA Red Seal, 74321 73568 2, 2005), 11-12.

⁴³ Heiner Müller, *Mauser* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1983), 94, 96.

⁴⁴ Heiner Müller, 'GROSSES WURDE VOLLBRACHT', in Müller, *Warten auf der Gegenschräge: Gesammelte Gedichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014), 147.

Einberufung des IX. Parteitages der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands') in *Neues Deutschland* on 6 June 1975,⁴⁵ reveals that the poetic text contains not a single original word of Müller himself: it is an abbreviation, reduction, or, to retain the computing analogy from Müller's play, a 'compressed file' of Honecker's three thousand or so words. In a study of Müller's poetry and its sources, Katharina Ebrecht has termed this kind of poem a 'distilled end product' and 'transformation of the source text into gestural language'.⁴⁶ Her characterisation of Müller's method as 'writing through quotation and condensing [*verdichten*]' could indeed also be applied to Dessau's compositional technique, especially in his later works.⁴⁷

The omnipresence of Honecker's voice in 'GREAT THINGS HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED' may well explain why the published score of 1984 uses the cautious phrase 'arranged by Heiner Müller' ('eingerichtet von Heiner Müller'), whilst a note on the score in Dessau's hand dated

⁴⁵ Erich Honecker, 'Zur Einberufung des IX. Parteitages der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands', *Neues Deutschland*, 6 June 1975, 45.

⁴⁶ Katharina Ebrecht, *Heiner Müller's Lyrik: Quellen und Vorbilder* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), 76, 84.

⁴⁷ Ebrecht, *Heiner Müller's Lyrik*, 194. Although Ebrecht (78-80) does not comment on the poem's title, Müller's adaptation of Franziska Meister's translation of Bai Juyi's poem 'The Red Parrot' ('Der rote Papagei') seems particularly suggestive in the current context (not least given that in Arthur Waley's English-language rendering of the Chinese original, used by Meister, it is a cockatoo).

February 1976, in the Paul-Dessau-Archiv, has 'written by Heiner Müller' ('gedichtet von Heiner Müller').⁴⁸ The comparison shows that Müller took forty-two syntactic units from twelve of the speech's thirty five paragraphs, with the samples lifted from across the entire text – as the Hamlet Actor puts it: 'I feed the computer with my data.'⁴⁹ Whether the poem is thus, as Žižek suggests, an ironic allusion to Honecker's reputation in the GDR as a would-be poet remains a matter of speculation, as does the interesting claim made by Corinne Holtz in her biography of director Ruth Berghaus that the homophonous choral repetitions of the bass line amount to a caricature of the parroting of Party propaganda. I shall return to this question at the end of this essay.⁵⁰

The composition of Müller's poem can, manifestly (and in the spirit of Holtz), be read as an act of authorial self-renunciation or self-denial: Müller serves merely as a mouthpiece, puppet, or parrot of the General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party. Conversely, however, it could also be understood as an act of self-constitution or identity formation through quotation (or plagiarism) of the political kind advocated by Brecht, Benjamin, and Dessau himself. The same can, of course, be said of the music, at least insofar as the confident S-E-D motif derived from *Lukullus* via *To the Mothers and To the Teachers*, *Appeal of the Working Class* and *Einstein* is concerned. As Dessau wrote in a text to accompany his near-

⁴⁸ AdK, Berlin, PDA 1.74.1132.3.

⁴⁹ Müller, *Mauser*, 94-5.

⁵⁰ Corinne Holtz, *Ruth Berghaus: Ein Porträt* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2005), 93. See also Note 40 above.

contemporary *Orchestral Music No. 4*, ‘since I don’t believe in “originality” I go for continuity’.⁵¹ Müller, for his part, put it rather more bluntly: ‘I don’t have any ideas. I never have had any ideas... I copy so much that no one person can spot it’.⁵² Revealingly, in the context of (non-)authorship, or rather co-authorship, Müller’s poem was re-published in 1987 as the only ‘foreign text’ (‘Fremdtext’)⁵³ in a volume of Honecker’s collected thoughts on culture: *Our Age Demands Combative Art and Culture* (*Unsere Zeit verlangt eine kämpferische Kunst und Kultur*), published by the Aufbau Verlag in a limited and luxury edition of 333 copies. Moreover, in the light of the recent publication of Müller’s complete poetry – which provides ample evidence to support the view that, counter to many post-modern and post-GDR interpretations of his work, he remained committed to aspects of Marxism throughout his career – there is no obvious reason to assume that the poem is

⁵¹ Paul Dessau, ‘Zur Orchestermusik Nr. 4’, in *Paul Dessau 1894-1979: Dokumente zu Leben und Werk*, ed. by Daniela Reinhold (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1995), 142.

⁵² Quoted in Katharina Ebrecht, *Heiner Müller’s Lyrik: Quellen und Vorbilder* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), 42.

⁵³ Anon., “‘Was gebraucht wird’: Heiner Müllers Verse nach Worten Erich Honeckers’, *Spiegel*, 47/ 8 (22 February 1993), 212.

either ironic or a deconstruction of Honecker's speech. If it is, then the latter roundly misunderstood it in having it included in his collected thoughts on art and culture.⁵⁴

The musical language of *Choral Music No. 5* both reflects and offsets the (ideological) simplicity of the text it sets. It is in C major but with harshly dissonant passages setting off the serial repetition of the three-note S-E-D motif, which in bb. 120-21 finally occurs in its original, un-transposed form following the ecstatic utterance of the word 'Communism', divided up into 'Kommunis-mus', the suffix '-mus' being a homonym in German for 'muß', 'must' (see Example 4).

Example 3: Paul Dessau, *Choral Music No. 5* (bb. 120-21). ©1981 by Edition Peters, Leipzig. Reproduced by kind permission of Peters Edition Limited, London.

mus,

For all its emotional intensity – Žižek refers to 'harsh declarations and injunctions, accompanied by rather brutal drum beatings'⁵⁵ – instructions in the score also include 'light,

⁵⁴ Müller's own poetic epitaph for Honecker, the 1989 poem 'Light Rain on Light Dust' ('Leichter Regen auf leichtem Staub'), a reworking of Li Bai ('Rihaku') via Ezra Pound, certainly does not offer a definitive answer here. Müller, *Warten auf der Gegenschräge*, 89.

⁵⁵ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 700.

springing' [b. 38], 'elegant' [b. 45], and 'extremely tender' [b. 52], attributes perhaps not generally associated with Dessau's gestures of commitment. Again this suggests musical conflict, tension, and dialectics. Moreover, the complexity of the music inevitably challenges, deconstructs even, the blatancy of the poetic text it sets, transforming it into something unresolved, indicating perhaps that Honecker's straightforward-sounding communist utopia – laid bare by Müller's poem – is, as Brecht put it in the *Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*, if not 'the unreachable' then certainly 'the / Not-as-yet reached'.⁵⁶

In *The Difficulties of Modernism* Leonard Diepeveen refers to difficulty as 'high culture's default position'.⁵⁷ In his 'balancing act between loyalty to the GDR, an impetus to enlighten and artistic truthfulness',⁵⁸ as well as his unstinting faith in socialism and the modernism represented by Schoenberg and Brecht, Dessau believed that New Music had to be simultaneously progressive and pedagogical, high culture in dialogue with the masses. In a letter to his own former teacher René Leibowitz of 2 January 1950 Dessau wrote out the coda of *Lukullus* in short score, extracting the S-E-D cryptogram and adding the note 'A Celebration of the "SED."'⁵⁹ For the next twenty-five years Dessau would embed this simple cipher within complex, sometimes difficult musical contexts as a shorthand declaration of continued allegiance to the two modernisms, aesthetic and political, discussed in this

⁵⁶ BFA 3: 27.

⁵⁷ Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2003), 230.

⁵⁸ Noeske, *Musikalische Dekonstruktion*, 2.

⁵⁹ AdK, Berlin, Dessau 2036, p. 2.

essay.⁶⁰ As such, it functioned not only as an audible (and readable) quotation – one of those ‘old things’ which, in his own words, he frequently ‘rolled out and deliberately transformed [...] into something new’⁶¹ – but also as a reminder of what the Party had ‘Not-as-yet reached’.

In his notes to *Orchestral Music No. 4* quoted above, Dessau refers to his use of quotation in a range of pieces, noting that he had woven references to Bach and Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck into *Lukullus* and citing Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro* K. 492 as an antecedent for his own citational practice, concluding: ‘when it came to “quotation” Mozart was clearly as “lax” as Brecht’.⁶² Having acknowledged his own preference for continuity over originality – this passage has already been cited – Dessau describes his method of quotation as “sublating” (in the Hegelian sense) existing material and trying to remould it’.⁶³ The German term used by Dessau here is *aufheben*, a remarkable concept insofar as it embraces a range of seemingly incompatible meanings, something which evidently added to its appeal for

⁶⁰ See also: Peter Wollen: ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’, in Wollen, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso and NLB, 1982), 92-104; Wollen: “‘Ontology’ and ‘Materialism’ in Film”, in Wollen: *Readings and Writings*, 189-207.

⁶¹ Dessau, *Aus Gesprächen*, 23.

⁶² Dessau, ‘Zur Orchestermusik Nr. 4’, 142.

⁶³ Ibid.

Hegel: it can mean to preserve, to save, to suspend, to integrate, to neutralize, to reverse, to cancel, to rescind, to negate, to unmake, as well as to sublate in the philosophical sense.

I would suggest, in conclusion, that *Aufhebung* is a fitting term for Dessau's musical programme as discussed in this essay through the example of *Choral Music No. 5*; contingent on the hard work of production, performance, and reception, it is a programme which embraces the ostensibly contradictory principles of consonance and dissonance, simplicity and complexity, originality and quotation, innovation and replication. In Dessau's remarkable synthesis of political and aesthetic modernism, socialist rhetoric is preserved, suspended, and potentially unmade in its reiteration.

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